

**Where the Spirits meet the Bone**  
**St Mark's Broomhill, Sheffield 7<sup>th</sup> November 2010**

'My bones cling to my skin!' – 'I am skin and bone!' – Job's cry to his mocking friends and his silent God. 'Have pity on me, have pity on me.' Few words speak so powerfully of suffering, mortality and loss, as 'bone'. Illness and grief; loneliness and despair; poverty and disaster; violence and war; oppression and indifference, can reduce us all to skin and bone and to Job's cry of dereliction. To be pared to 'bone' is the reality and the symbol of extreme suffering. And as reality and symbol, bone becomes the anvil on which faith and theology are forged – the place where, in Miller Williams' words, *the spirit meets the bone*.

In talking to Ian about today, and how this might complement your recent seminar series on illness, suffering and faith, he suggested I might explore *How new expressions of spirituality and theology open up resources when everything is taken away?* It's a crucial question, for if spirituality has nothing to say to suffering, then it has nothing to say. And it's an urgent question too, as most traditional theological responses to suffering ring ever more emptily in 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. As Dorothee Soelle says in her book called, simply, 'Suffering', *whenever people are confronted by senseless suffering, faith in a God who embodies both omnipotence and love has to waver or be destroyed*. And she writes even more provocatively of the Christian masochism and Christian sadism which traditional theological explanations have created, and to which we are, to an astonishing degree, still tied.

Ian's question became real for me last year, through the unlikely channel of a science fiction novel. Not my usual choice of reading, but *The Sparrow*, by Mary Doria Russell, was recommended by my dear friend and spiritual director, Pia Buxton, who died last month. *The Sparrow* is the story of a mission to another planet, beginning some ten years from now. Drawn by the compelling beauty of song-like sounds picked up from Alpha Centauri, a small team of oddly-assorted men and women set out into space in a hollowed-out asteroid, in search of the songsters of Rakhat. The voyage is secretly funded by the Jesuits and Emilio Sandoz SJ is the central character.

It's one of the most disturbing, harrowing and seriously theological books I've ever read, and it haunts me still – at its heart is the story of what happens when a good man's body, faith, and love are tested, tortured, to the *bone*.

As he recounts his ordeal to his superiors back in Italy, a ravaged, disorientated Emilio cries *It wasn't my fault! It was either blind, dumb, stupid luck from start to finish, in which case we are all in the wrong business gentlemen, or it was a God I cannot worship*. All his life Emilio had been *on a path to God*, that he *thought he understood* but, in anguish, he concludes, *God left me*.

Emilio's experience is universal. Dorothee Soelle says that *All extreme suffering evokes the experience of being forsaken by God* – when God is understood as *that which a person trusts...That which gave life its meaning has become empty and void: it turned out to be an error, an illusion that is shattered*. Emilio's suffering was physical, psychological and social, but above all, for him, it was spiritual. It destroyed the image of God he had loved and lived for, and destroyed every shred of meaning and purpose not just in his life, but in the

universe. Only a sadist could suggest that such destruction was God's intention; only a masochist would believe it.

Far saintlier beings than I will ever be, and far more sophisticated theologians, have grappled with the problem of suffering down the ages: how to explain it, and how to live with hope within it. The challenge lies close to the heart of all religions and philosophies. So what, I was forced to ask, does today's emerging spirituality, and its developing theology, have to say to agony such as Emilio's?

I suggested in our conference yesterday that for all that is bogus and commercial, trivial and self-serving in *contemporary spirituality*, there is, nonetheless, a small but growing number of people – both in and beyond the churches – who are embarked upon a pioneering, radical and deeply committed spiritual path. Gordon Lynch calls these people *spiritual progressives*, while the Australian writer and broadcaster Rachel Kohn describes them as *The New Believers*.

Whatever the label, the emerging spirituality and theology of these pioneers does, I believe, open up resources we can draw on when everything we have trusted is stripped away. Resources, not answers, and in the moment when suffering overwhelms us completely, we will not be able to access them and should feel no guilt or failure that this is so. These resources are not about explaining suffering or making it in some sense meaningful, and therefore manageable. They are resources discovered in the silence and honesty of contemplative practice, and in the integration of new ways of imaging God.

Suffering – our own and other's – makes us cry out Why?! But as Simone Weil affirms, *there is no reply*. Worse, she continues, *When one finds a comforting answer... one has constructed it oneself*. Language and intellect are stretched to breaking point in these constructions – and while words like *paradox* and *mystery* may serve some purpose in detached debate, they ring hollow in the face of real pain.

Bertolt Brecht said that *We must break ourselves of the habit of walking towards places that cannot be reached on foot... thinking about problems that cannot be solved through thought*. Spirituality's rediscovery of the mystical, or contemplative, tradition offers a way to break the habit of trying to solve the problem of suffering through thought. And it does so by helping us to face into the *reality* of inexplicable suffering and to tolerate – accept, though *accept* is a dangerous word in this context – the lack of answers.

The influential Franciscan, Richard Rohr, says that *contemplation is a long, loving look at what really is*. And Cynthia Bourgeault, in her book *Mystical Hope – Trusting in the Mercy of God* says that this, precisely, is Job's experience: *As the agony of his ordeal settles into simply the way things are, she writes, and even the need to apportion blame and find coherence subsides, what seems to take wing in him is a single-hearted yearning to see God face-to-face, and a lyrical certainty that his redeemer lives*.

The mystics of all traditions have been on intimate terms with suffering – but they have also discovered within and beyond the reality of their pain and disorientation, a new form of hope and a new way of being with God. The hope of the mystic is one *not tied to outcomes*,

in Cynthia Bourgeault's words. *It lives a life of its own, seemingly without reference to external circumstances and conditions. It has something to do with presence, she says, not a future good outcome, but the immediate experience of being met, held in communion by something intimately at hand, and it bears fruit within us – strength, joy, and satisfaction... but mysteriously, rather than deriving these gifts from outward expectations being met, it seems to produce them from within.*

St John of the Cross, like Job, suffered greatly – imprisoned, tormented, abandoned – but within the desolation of the Dark Night of his soul, he eventually experienced the strength, joy, satisfaction and *Presence*, which Cynthia Bourgeault identifies and which Iain Matthew, writing about John, describes as *a more total form of togetherness with God.*

Now of course you could be sitting there thinking that the resources the mystical and contemplative tradition bring to our experience of suffering have been available for centuries, so it's odd of me to claim their riches for contemporary spirituality. But while they have been available, they've been largely hidden, and are coming to our attention again now because today's spiritual progressives are finding common ground with the experience and insights of the mystics of the past, as they confront the harsh realities of the present, and looming problems of the future – the fearful sense of suffering to come.

In a compelling paper called *Impasse and Dark Night*, a modern-day Carmelite, Constance Fitzgerald, writes *Behind every new spirituality and every creative re-envisioning of the world – at the root of any real theology – is an experience of God. Yet every religious experience comes from a meeting with a new and challenging face of God in one's own time and social situation.*

That new and challenging face of God in our own time and social situation is still emerging – but while we may see it only darkly now, we know that the new face of God is being radically shaped by discoveries in science and cosmology and in the study of consciousness.

It's madness, really, to introduce such huge themes at this stage in a very short talk, but you know of course, that there's an important and growing literature out there, that's opening up extraordinary new insights into the evolving nature of creation, and challenging old assumptions about the relationship between consciousness and matter, spirit and bone. Judy Cannato is one writer who is drawing these strands together in books like *Fields of Compassion – How the New Cosmology is Transforming Spiritual Life*, and *Radical Amazement – Contemplative Lessons from Black Holes, Supernovas and Other Wonders of the Universe.*

She doesn't name suffering as her theme, but she does write this in *Radical Amazement*:

*Our capacity for self-transcendence asserts that healing is possible, that we are more than our wounds and our scars. As we engage this capacity, we grow in freedom. As we embrace the process that allows us to transcend, fear begins to fall away as we recognise our value as part of the whole that is continuing to emerge.*

Key to this process, she, and all the other voices I've called upon this morning, agree, is a commitment to living in contemplative awareness. More and more people are discovering that the way to live in such awareness is to develop a daily practice of silent meditation, and if you're looking for advice and information to help you do this, there are numerous guides available. Two of the best that I know are Martin Laird's *Into the Silent Land* and Cynthia Bourgeault's *Centring Prayer and Inner Awakening*, but there are many others, and they all say more-or-less the same thing.

There are, then, I believe, resources in contemporary spirituality and theology which help us respond to suffering: they do not explain suffering; they do not lessen it nor deny it. Most importantly, they do not attach to it blasphemous meanings. They are resources which help us to inhabit the reality of our suffering, and to sit with others in their suffering. And beyond the pain, these resources can, sometimes, take us to new depths of wholeness, love and compassion.

Jane Hirshfield captures something of the mystery towards which I'm fumbling in her prose poem *Between the Material World and the World of Feeling*: *Between the material world and the world of feeling, she writes, there must be a border – on one side, the person grieves and the cells of the body grieve also; the molecules; the atoms. Of this there are many proofs. On the other, the iron will of the earth goes on. **The torture-broken femur continues to heal even in the last hour, perhaps beyond.***